

Guns, Butter, and Ballots

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An article of mine is running in January/February 2005 issue of Communication Arts.

If any of you were wondering what all that Nixon bit on the Federal Design Assembly was about, it was background research for this.

Choking victim poster

Like many New Yorkers, Paul Young ate out a lot. As an adjunct instructor of graphic design at Parsons School of Design, he always had his eyes open for interesting and practical projects to challenge his students. It wasn't long before he noticed the choking victim poster.

By law, every eating establishment in the city from the humblest taco stand to the trendiest bistro must visibly display an instructional poster illustrating the Heimlich Maneuver.

A mere week after Dr. Heimlich published his findings in 1974, the first choking victim was saved by the method. In 1978, the New York City City Council passed the law requiring every establishment where food is sold, regardless of size or design, to post a sign depicting the Maneuver. They passed the bill unanimously five days before the feasts of Christmas. The law requires the Department of Health to make the signs freely available.

Fast forward to 1996 and, as noted in the U.K. Independent, “[after 20 years] the Department of Health grew concerned that, in a city like New York, where dining in is the exception, habitual restaurant-goers may suffer from over-exposure to Heimlich signs, and that, over time, the charts risk becoming so much civic-minded wallpaper.”

They were in luck. At just that moment, Paul Young was looking to bring the choking victim poster back to life. All it took was a phone book and a couple of calls for Young to find Ann Sternberg, director of media materials and education for the Bureau of Public Health. “It was easier than I thought,” Young recalls. “She was ecstatic.”

For a city official who reports to committees, the situation was ideal: the school was well-known; Young's class would propose not one, but many designs; and the students were politically neutral, with no strings or political connections attached. And they offered to do the designs for free.

Young's design class partnered with an illustration class at Parsons. Design student Laura Berkowitz Gilbert was impressed with the illustrations of Sandra Hepp. “She had a great, strong style,” she recalls. “Her work was very graphic, I knew it would work well for a big poster.”

The old institutional orange poster needed plenty of work. Previously, Berkowitz Gilbert notes, “One of the hands had six fingers.” The students even gave the copy a light edit. Together, they redesigned it with a vibrant new Constructivist-inspired design in primary colors.

The Hepp and Berkowitz Gilbert poster was one of three that were accepted for printing. But among restaurateurs it was by far the favorite.

Six months after the printing, city officials were so pleased that they sent the posters to Dr. Heimlich himself, who personally sent back a signed copy praising the students' work.

The now ubiquitous poster is certainly hard to miss. Though nearly ten years later, perhaps it's time for another redesign?

CHOKING VICTIM

THE HEIMLICH MANEUVER *

WHEN THE VICTIM HAS COLLAPSED AND CANNOT BE LIFTED

- 1 Lay the victim on his back.
- 2 Face the victim and kneel astride his hips.
- 3 With one hand on top of the other, place the heel of your bottom hand on the abdomen slightly above the navel and below the rib cage.
- 4 Press into the victim's abdomen with a QUICK UPWARD THRUST. Repeat as often as necessary to dislodge food.
- 5 Should the victim vomit, quickly place him on his side and wipe out his mouth to prevent vomit from being drawn into the throat.
- 6 After food is dislodged, the victim should see a doctor.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- The victim collapses
- The victim cannot speak or breathe
- The victim turns blue

WHEN THE VICTIM IS STANDING OR SITTING

- 1 Stand behind the victim and wrap your arms around the victim's waist.
- 2 Place the thumb side of your fist against the victim's abdomen, slightly above the navel and below the rib cage.
- 3 Grasp your fist with the other hand and press your fist into the victim's abdomen with a QUICK UPWARD THRUST. Repeat as often as necessary to dislodge food.
- 4 If the victim is sitting, stand behind the victim's chair and perform the maneuver in the same manner.
- 5 After food is dislodged, the victim should see a doctor.



The poster features two main illustrations. The top illustration shows a rescuer kneeling over a collapsed victim lying on their back. The rescuer's hands are positioned on the victim's abdomen, with arrows indicating the upward thrust. The bottom illustration shows a rescuer standing behind a standing or sitting victim, with arms wrapped around the waist and hands positioned on the abdomen. Arrows indicate the upward thrust. The background is a stylized yellow and blue design with a large 'X' shape.

Design & Illustration: Lavena Berkowitz & Sandra Hepp

* Heimlich Maneuver T.M. pending

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